

An Exploration of High School Novel Teaching Methods Using the Narrator as an Entry Point

—The Man in the Suit as an Example

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Abstract: Nowadays, pedagogical techniques are often inflexible, which has resulted in a decline in students' enthusiasm for novel approaches to learning. Their reading is characterised by a lack of coherence, and they experience difficulties in consolidating the reading knowledge acquired in class. Accordingly, this paper employs a literature research method to learn from previous studies, and uses an investigative method to collect data. This paper starts from the narrator of narratology theory to analyse the novel *The Man in the Suit*. The data of this research comes from analysis and summary of the questionnaire, which was distributed to 172 high school students, and analysed to integrate the results of the survey. In the end, the research designs a teaching process based on the theory of narratology, and concludes some suggestions for novel teaching. The research suggests that educators integrate narrative knowledge into their teaching practices, such as using narrative knowledge as a clue when reading, encouraging students to use the learned knowledge to analyse novels. Additionally, teachers should expand the scope of their curriculum to enhance students' reading abilities.

Keywords: High school language teaching, Novel teaching, Theory of narratology, *The Man in the Suit*.

1. Introduction

Novel teaching plays an essential part in high school language teaching. In this field, there are many senior teachers and scholars who have explored how the theory of narratology can be applied in actual novel teaching, involving the narrator, the character analysis method of narratology, and various aspects of the role of the environment. However, most of the studies have been more about making suggestions for novel teaching as a whole, with fewer suggestions for specific teaching programs, and focusing on a fixed number of texts. This paper will try to fill the gaps in previous research by interpreting *The Man in the Suit*, which has been less covered by previous studies, from a narrative perspective and formulating instructional design and pedagogical recommendations. Starting from the narrator of narratology theory, the research uses case study method, analyzes the novel *The Man in the Suit* as an example for novel teaching. The research also adopts literature review methodology to learn from previous studies, and employs the investigative method to collect data. This study

contributes to the advancement of novel teaching in secondary education by offering insights into the design of effective instructional strategies and the cultivation of students' literary comprehension abilities. The enhanced pedagogical approach will foster greater engagement with literary works and enhance students' appreciation for and proficiency in reading and writing. Furthermore, the study will offer novel insights into the enhancement of novel teaching quality.

2. Overview

2.1. An Important Textual Material

A novel is a genre that employs narrative storytelling to explore the lives of characters within a context of evolving plots and environments and shows the characteristics of different times with vivid plots[1]. It is because of the ups and downs of the plot, vivid characters, and deep and broad ideas that the novel has become one of the required literary genres in and out of high school. Therefore, the novel reading and teaching occupy an important position in high school language teaching.

2.2. Reasons to Emphasize Novel Teaching

In today's society, students are confronted with the significant challenge of managing the demands of their academic studies. The majority of their time is spent preparing for and taking tests, which results in a lack of engagement with careful reading. As a result, students become less interested in reading and less proficient in deep reading comprehension. If teachers don't innovate their teaching methods, students will be less interested in reading class. Therefore, teachers need to innovate the content and methods of novel teaching, and strive to maximize the students' deep reading, stimulate their reading interest, and improve students' literary appreciation, comprehension and aesthetic ability[2].

The general standard for language curriculum of secondary schools and college entrance examination also calls for the innovation of reading teaching methods. The fundamental objectives set forth by the curriculum standard are closely aligned with novel reading and instruction. The curriculum standard requires that teachers cultivate students' aesthetic ability, reading and appreciation ability, and moral sentiment in reading classes, which means the emphasis of high-quality novel teaching[3]. The college entrance examination's questions not only aim to examine students' ability of plot understanding, but also include understanding of narratology knowledge[4]. To meet this trend, teachers should improve their novel teaching methods, and introduce the narratology to teaching.

2.3. Review of Previous Research

There are some previous studies on the application of narratology to novel teaching. Scholars have cited the theories of narrative perspective and narrator discourse analysis on novel teaching. Some scholars have summarised problems of novel teaching through questionnaires, and have drawn the conclusion that the perspective, spatial and temporal awareness should be paid more attention in novel teaching[5,6]. Scholars have also suggested using the conceptual theory of 'spatial point of view' to interpret novels[7].

In summary, the application of narratological theory in novel teaching has been emphasized by scholars and provides suggestions for the improvement of this field[8]. However, there's still a lack of procedural knowledge to guide, and most of the researches are concentrated on articles such as *Lin Daiyu Entering the Jaffa House*, *Kong Yijie*, and *My Uncle Yule*, but less on other texts.

2.4. Survey and Results

A questionnaire was designed and subsequently administered to four classes at a local high school as part of a survey. The questionnaire included whether the students like reading novels, whether they like novel classes, how often they read novels and what kinds of novels they prefer, and suggestions for novel classes. The results of the survey are as follows.

The results show that students' interest in novels has reduced. Their reading is fragmented, and they have trouble in mastering the reading knowledge in class. Students pointed out that the novel classes lack 'novelty'. The teacher's explanation is seriously patterned, which makes students have difficulties in understanding the deep meaning of the article, and have difficulties appreciating and writing novels.

In conclusion, high school students lack deep analysis and reflections on novels, which is related to the rigidity of novel teaching.

3. Interpretation of Narratological Perspectives

3.1. Narrator

Readers often consider the narrator as somebody speaking aside. In fact, he matters more than you can imagine. The narrator could affect the vividness of the story, decide novel's linguistic style, also can make readers see things in his way, which creates a complex relationship between the character's own opinions and the real theme of the story. Take Burgin for example, his double identities of narrator and novel character makes his narration more convincing. As he hates Belikov, the readers may be amused by his humorous, ironic language. Readers' attitude towards Belikov and the society would be affected by Burgin because he uses lots of expressions with strong emotional tendencies, which might possibly lead to a misunderstanding of the theme. Burgin doesn't seek for a change to his life, but the real theme of the story is to call on people to wake up from this 'in-suit' life and start to change. The other narrator, Ivan, holds an opinion that people should change their 'in-suit' life, but this plot isn't included by the textbook, which may cause absence of text integrity.

3.2. Narrative Perspective

Narrative perspective means the way to observe the story. The narrative perspective is closely related to the narrator, and can be broadly divided into 2 types, external and internal perspectives[9]. In this story, the perspective changes from external to internal, and this change has created an ingenious narrative structure of 'story in a story', which makes Burgin and Ivan the driving force behind the development of the story.

3.3. Description of the Environment

Classical narratology divides narrative space into 'event' and 'discourse', and Chatman argues that 'event space' refers to the place where the story goes on, and 'discourse space' refers to the place or environment the narrative act takes place[10]. In this story, the midnight village landscape has both characteristics of the two. The story happens here, so does the narrative act occur. After Burgin finishes telling Belikov's story, there is a description of the village landscape at midnight, followed by Ivan's thoughts for life. The village is no longer filled with human figures or movement, and immensely restful, free and expansive. This description of the setting reflects the state of mind of the two men: a longing for an existence free from constant surveillance, reporting and pressure. Because the landscape is so beautiful, Ivan is unable to sleep because of his longing to live in this kind of moonlight.

3.4. Character Analysis

In narratology, there are two types of character analysis: functional and psychological. The functional character-view stresses the narrative function of characters, the characters' main use is to drive the development of the plot. In this story, the characters are more likely to be functional, they all serve the main character, Belikov, interacting with him to bring out his personality traits to readers. The story portrays several types of people in a high-pressure social environment, from which readers can get a glimpse of the multitude of images of that era.

4. Instructional Design

The teaching design of *The Man in the Suit* is based on the narratological interpretation of the novel and the analysis of the learning situation[11]. The teaching design comprises the teaching time, teaching aims, teaching focus and teaching process. The process aims to facilitate students' learning through questioning and discussion. It seeks to enable students to analyse the role of the narrator, to understand narrative shifts in perspective, to appreciate the description of the environment, and finally, to explore the novel's central idea. The comprehensive teaching plan is available in the appendix.

5. Teaching Suggestions

5.1. Introducing Narratological Knowledge to Novel Teaching

Before using narratological knowledge to analyse a text, teachers should introduce the necessary narratological knowledge before the start of the text analysis session. It would be easier to understand if teachers start from simple concepts, such as knowledge of narrators and analytical perspectives. Teachers can explain the text from the point of view of the narrator by supplementing the reading material, which would lead to a discussion of the theme of the story.

5.2. Using Narrative Knowledge as a Clue for Novel Reading

As the narrative perspective changes throughout the text, students may not have found the effect of narrative perspective change, but it will play a role in the students' reading experience. If the teacher leads the students to analyze the change of narrative perspective, the students will come to realize that the origin (a certain effect of the reading experience) is due to the change of narrative perspective! Teachers can first let students read the text, let them think about the characteristics of the structure of the article to find, feel the change in narrative perspective brought about by the characteristics of the article and the effect of expression.

5.3. Encouraging Students to Apply the Learned Knowledge to Novel Analysis

Students have reflected that the methods of analyzing novels learned in class do not work well in their extracurricular reading, this is because the knowledge only stays inside the classrooms. Teachers should encourage students to analyse novels by themselves. Teachers could design some comparative extracurricular reading tasks and assignments, such as analyzing *My Uncle Yule* from the narrator's point of view. The homework of extended and comparative reading can help students to review what they've learned in class, and improve their ability of analyzing novels independently.

5.4. Extending Learning Content

Students' low reading ability is partly due to the low amount of extracurricular reading and the low interest in reading caused by study pressure. To really improve students' reading ability, teachers

should encourage them to read more after-class. Teachers should organize more reading classes, activities such as 'share a book' activity, micro-fiction writing exercises and so on. These activities will raise students' interest in reading, and improve their literacy skills.

6. Conclusion

This paper has reached the conclusion that the novel *The Man in the Suit* is best analysed by applying the principles of narratology. The narrator truly plays an important part in the novel, which could be an entry point for the analysis of novels. The paper has come up with an instructional design, and some suggestions towards novel teaching. However, this research still leaves something to be desired. The questionnaire survey only chose students as the survey objects, and if conditions permit, interviews with teachers will provide a different perspective for the research. In future studies, the paper would benefit from a more in-depth examination of the perspectives of teachers. While the narrators have been extensively examined, the exploration of other aspects of narratology is insufficient. The research will endeavour to gain a deeper understanding and apply the findings to innovative pedagogical approaches.

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Appendix

Instructional Design

Teaching time: 2 hours

Teaching aims:

- Understand the concept of narrator and to analyse the role of the narrator in the novel.
- Experience the artistic effect and role of the narrative shift of perspective.
- Understand the importance of environmental description and appreciate environmental description.

- Analyse the narrator, characters and environment to explore the main idea of the novel.

Teaching focus:

- Understand the concept of narrator, through the text and the original text of the novel, understand the role of the narrator in the main idea of the novel.
- Find out the main idea of the novel by analysing the narrator, the characters and the environment.

Teaching process:

1. Introduction

2. Narrator analysis:

2.1 Read the text independently and identify the "narrator" in the text.

2.2 Read the supplementary materials (the original text of the novel) and discuss in small groups what is the difference between the original text and the extracts from the text.

Duration: 10 minutes

Q1: Who is the narrator? Does he represent the author? Is he a "narrator" or a character in the story?

Answer: The narrator is Burgin, a colleague of Belikov. His point of view is not the author's (The passive, defenceless attitude is criticised by the author).

Q2 : What is the difference between the original text and the selection from the text? Have you made any new discoveries after reading the original text?

A: Difference: the original text has a description of a conversation between Burgin and his friend Ivan after the telling of Belikov's story. And this description contains new information: Ivan's and Burgin's attitudes towards the life in suits---- life is in such a trap. Their discussion about people in suits reveals their different attitudes towards life, and also reveals the existence of two different types of thinking at that time. Ivan's sleepless night shows that more and more people are recognising that there is something wrong with their lives, and looking for ways to change them.

3. Analysis of narrative perspective

To introduce the concept of narrative perspective: narrative perspective is the point of view from which a story is told. The identity of the narrator largely determines the narrative perspective. Narrative perspective can be broadly divided into internal and external perspectives: external perspective means that the author takes the viewpoint of the bystander to tell the story; internal perspective means that the author tells the story as a person in the story.

Q: Is there a shift in narrative point of view in the novel? What are its advantages and functions?

A: The novel has formed the structure of 'play within a play' of external perspective - internal perspective - external perspective. The narrator is inside the story, and the 'suit' not only exists in the story, but also covers the head of the narrator, even covers up the outside world of the story. The author lets the narrator have his own consciousness and become one of the characters of the story, in order to promote the development of the novel and make effective use of the characters; and the fact that the story is told by the people around Belikov adds to the authenticity of the story and makes the language more ordinary, humorous, sarcastic and interesting[12].

4. Environmental description analysis

Read the end of the original novel and think: What is the intention of the description of the village at midnight? What are the characteristics of the midnight village? Why did the author insert a large part of the description of the environment in the gap between the two conversations?

Group discussion: 5 minutes

Teacher asks questions, students answer, teacher summarises.

Teacher summarises:

The village at midnight is peaceful and quiet, with no human figures or movement, and it is incredibly peaceful, free and vast. This description of the environment reflects the state of mind of the two men: a longing for an environment where there is no surveillance, no reporting, no pressure.

The landscape is so beautiful that Ivan is unable to sleep because of his worries and longs to live under such moonlight.

5. Explore the main idea of the novel.

With humour, the author portrays an insensitive, bitter, victimized and victimizing person under a dictatorship, who is afraid of new things, afraid of anything that might violate the order, and who finally dies in this fear. By criticising Belikov, the author criticises the dirty political air of the time, criticises all the trapped people, points out the rottenness of the tsarist dictatorship and calls on the people to rise up and change society.